

‘Sanctify yourselves and be holy’ Hospitallers and their Counter-Reformation Saints.*

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In Catholicism, ‘sanctity’ is a word reserved for those who enjoy the presence of God. The term is not used lightly, nor is a saintly status achieved easily. In many ways, saints are not just individuals chosen by God, but also men and women chosen by a particular group of people as role models. Whilst most Christian denominations retain saints only as moral exemplars, Catholics venerate their saints as channels of divine power. It is for this reason that it is harder for the Catholic Church to elevate an individual to saint, than it is for any other religion or denomination, and since the very first proclaimed martyrs the Church has sought to define what values constitute sainthood. Theologically speaking, all the faithful departed who have been admitted in heaven are saints; but the main difference between the canonized saints and the rest lies in presenting the living with an ideal individual who best represents the qualities which the Church wishes to aspire to. This process of seeking individuals and presenting them to the universal Church for veneration is ongoing, as is also continuous the development of the body which is meant to examine these individuals.

In January 1983, Pope John Paul II issued a decree entitled *Divinus Perfectionis Magister*, the latest in a series of reforms of the

process of canonizations.¹ In his initial statements, the pontiff traces briefly the history of the canonization procedure, and highlights the importance of an element of continuity in Church tradition with regards to the choice of outstanding individuals to be made saints. John Paul II clearly states that “progress in the field of historical studies has shown the necessity of providing the competent Congregation [for the causes of saints] with an apparatus better suited for its task so as to respond more adequately to the dictates of historical criticism”. This reminds us that saint-making is just as temporal as it is spiritual in nature, rooted in history as much as in theology. Moreover, since saints on earth are chosen by a particular set of people, they are also representative of the qualities that those set of people uphold as ‘ideal’. In no period of Church history was this ‘ideal’ presented so vigorously, the cults of saints made so elaborate and the process so exacting, than it was during the Counter-Reformation or ‘Tridentine’² period. Scholars such as Peter Burke, Donald Weinstein, Rudolph Bell and Simon Ditchfield amongst others, studied saints in an attempt to understand the social psychology of Catholics in early modern Europe. One has to keep in mind that before achieving saintly status, saints were themselves members of society or a particular group of people, such as a religious order for instance. They interacted with a specific group of people, preached to the masses and possibly even performed miracles; they were therefore already powerful life-changers even before their death. Their presence and achievements in life, within a particular community, touched directly the hearts and minds of those around them, long before they were even considered for canonization. Cults were born, their earthly possessions became relics and their graves shrines. This domestic presence of saints,

1 Parts of this study were presented during two separate public lectures to the Malta Historical Society in Sept. 2015 and at the Oratory of St John’s Co-Cathedral in Oct. 2016. Special thanks for their invaluable assistance and guidance to Dr. Emanuel Buttigieg, Prof. Frans Ciappara and Mgr. Gwann Azzopardi.

http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_constitutions/documents/hf_jp-ii_apc_25011983_divinus-perfectionis-magister.html

2 From Trent, the city which hosted the Church Council between 1545 and 1563, to respond to the threat of Protestantism against the Catholic Church.

including people venerated as holy but who never actually made it to become officially recognized by the central authority, creates a deeper discussion on the role of saints in Catholic Tridentine devotion.

This paper will seek to take the Order of St John as a case-study in the culture of Counter-Reformation saints, analysing the first century from the Council of Trent. It has a dual purpose, understanding both the fabric of the Hospitaller vocation as presented through the hagiographies, as well as the constant need for an exempt religious Order to conform with Rome. Although the subject merits a more ample discussion, the present paper will seek to give at least a glimpse into such issues as conformity, tradition, miracles and universality in relation with the saints of the Order of St John from the late sixteenth to the late seventeenth centuries. It is in these hundred years that a major refashioning was taking place, one which combined the old with the new saints and martyrs that were being brought to light by the recent clash with Protestantism and the subsequent ‘soul-searching’ that the Church experienced.³

Tridentine Processes of Canonizations

In 1588, following continuous pressure from Philip II of Spain, St Peter’s Basilica held the first canonisation in sixty-five years, the candidate chosen being the friar Diego d’Alcalà (d.1463).⁴ The apparent reason for such a long suspension of the ‘saint factory’ is that Protestants mocked the whole Catholic approach to sainthood. Despite this criticism, the Church still believed in the power of providing models for imitation, understanding at the same time that cults had to

3 Ronnie Po-Chia Hsia, *The World of Catholic Renewal 1540-1770*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 127-143.

4 Claire Copeland, *Sanctity*. In A. Bamji, G. Hannsen and M. Laven eds., *The Ashgate Research Companion to the Counter Reformation*. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 225; Simon Ditchfield, *San Carlo and the Cult of Saints*. In ‘*Studia Borromaeica*’ 20, (2006), 145-154. The previous canonization, that of saints Benno of Meissen and Antonio of Florence, had taken place in 1523.

be controlled and regulated lest they result in superstitious practices. Canonizations increasingly assumed the role of a tool in the hands of the papacy, with its two main functions of the propagation of a moral benchmark on a universal scale and of empowering the papacy. These two objectives worked in tandem, and were controlled by means of two purposely set up mechanisms; the Holy Office of the Inquisition (1542) and the creation of a Sacred Congregation of Rites and Ceremonies (1588). One might argue that these ‘offices’ of the Church were the greatest hallmarks of Tridentism and early modern Christianity; the former ushered in the Council of Trent and the latter served to set the tone of reform afterwards. It is by extension of the same argument that one could also say that the renewed interest in canonizations constitutes one of the building blocks of early modern Catholicism, a catalyst of the Baroque.

Following the end of the Council of Trent, the Church had a lot on its plate. First of all, there was an immense pressure on the papacy to concretize what had been agreed upon. This was not as straight-forward as it would seem, particularly due to the fact that the Council had discussed many matters, but was far from being an ‘all encompassing’ guide. Secondly, despite the obvious setbacks for Catholics in central and northern Europe, Catholicism was growing at a fast rate beyond Europe. This meant that Catholicism now had to cater for societies which were physically, culturally and socially farther apart than anything Europeans could imagine. To take one example, between 1582 and 1590, a Japanese embassy reached Europe. Jesuit priests had chosen a few young noblemen to travel to Europe and meet the Pope as a demonstration of the invaluable work that the Society of Jesus was doing in the Far East.⁵ Nobody had ever seen a Samurai, just as nobody knew who the Inca or the North American Indian tribes were, but they were converting to Catholicism and soon after, some showed desire to join the religious orders, whilst others were also willing to lay down their lives for their newly-found faith. Religious practice had to

5 Derek Massarella, *The Japanese Embassy to Europe (1582–1590)*: A lecture delivered on 13 December 2012. <http://www.hakluyt.com/PDF/Massarella.pdf>

transcend cultural barriers, and the Church increasingly felt the need to create a universal identity. The opportunity presented itself for one of early modern Catholicism's greatest heroes, St Charles Borromeo, to step in. What St Charles created can be termed a 'spiritual machine', which once set in motion, was tasked as follows in the words of the saint himself: 'You have to dig in! Dig in the wall, deeply shake up the souls and turn the fields of conscience'.⁶ It was St Charles who brought up, amongst other things, the cults of saints as a means of 'turning the fields of conscience'. He was a stage director for sacred events, and his ceremonies were public demonstrations of the power of saints, strengthening the resolve of the faithful to endure the hardships of life, resist heresy, and persevere in their loyalty to the Catholic cause.

In this setting, the Church felt the need to present new models of sanctity which would rebrand it as triumphant over the obstacles of the earlier sixteenth century. It had to show that it had emerged from crisis with a clear direction and substantially structured, to be able to assume control over the ever-growing number of cults that resulted from the spiritual drive of the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. A second reason for the Church to make new saints was to confirm itself as the legitimate one true 'Mother Church', whose foundations lay in the certainty of the gospels and an un-interrupted tradition of holy men and women. Much in the spirit of the Council of Trent, the Church took an increasing interest in its history, stimulated in particular by the setbacks of divisions, which it equated with the persecution of Christians by the Roman Empire. A desire to rediscover its origins was stimulated by the belief that saints and martyrs would sow the seed for the growth of the Church.⁷ The search for origins was not only philosophical. Antonio Bosio literally took it upon himself to rediscover the physical remains

6 Ditchfield, *San Carlo and the Cult of Saints*, 145; St Charles borrowed the metaphor of digging from Ezekiel 8: 8.

7 Matthias Ebejer, *The Concept of Martyrdom within Hospitaller Devotional Practices; The fallen at St Elmo as a case study*. In Maroma Camilleri ed., *Besieged* (National Library: Malta, 2015), vol. I, 125-135: The idea was first promoted by first century theologian, Tertullian, who wrote that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church'.

of the first martyrs in forgotten catacombs such as that of Priscilla (rediscovered in 1578). Following these discoveries, southern Europe, in particular Italy, experienced a wave of new cults of martyred Christians and the first saints. Many others associated contemporary martyrs of the various missions and clashes with Protestants and Muslims, to the first martyrs. Only that in most cases, these contemporary martyrs had not yet been canonized as saints following the new procedure. We shall return to this subject at a later stage.

To understand the concept of sainthood in early modern Catholicism, one has to stress the distinction between canonization, the official process which culminates in the declaration that the individual is without a doubt in the grace of God in heaven, and holiness in the popular perception which might lead to the foundation of cults and prayers for intercession, despite lacking the official recognition from the authorities in Rome.

‘... we need to move beyond the identification of the history of the cult of saints with the history of canonization and appreciate that during the period never had so many saints (from *all* periods of Christian history) been integrated into Roman Catholic worship and devotion. Moreover, the inclusion of those whose universal cults were approved by Rome in the list of those who received papal recognition (1588-1665) points to the issue which Trent placed centre stage: how to reconcile particular, local practice with universal, Roman precepts’.⁸

Even in the sacred texts, the use of *hagios*, meaning holiness, is ambiguous. The same word was used for both living and dead individuals, prophets, apostles and martyrs as well as the Holy Spirit and Christ, without giving clear indication on how to identify holiness

8 Simon Ditchfield, *Tridentine Worship and the Cult of the Saints*. In R. Po-Chia Hsia, ed., *The Cambridge History of Christianity*, vol. 6, *Reform and Expansion 1500-1660* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 207.

in an individual.⁹ Certainly one has to agree that any official recognition had to follow years of unofficial cults, as these regional cults were the means through which Rome came to know of the presence of a saint. Historiography has been recently discussing this process of identifying saints and their values through the lens of interaction between the core and periphery of Catholicism, as well as through negotiation between clergy and laity. Local devotions were allowed to exist in a controlled environment, and religious orders played a vital role in this exercise, in particular when it came to promoting new saints alongside older ones.¹⁰

There is an element of continuity with medieval spirituality in promoting saints as moral exemplars. However, the Council of Trent sought to redefine holiness, in particular to regulate cults to eradicate superstitious practices. The Council only recognised saints as 'teachers of holy living', but the process of refashioning sainthood would be much longer.¹¹ A Congregation of Rites was set up in 1588, with the aim of controlling regional cults and a series of decrees during Urban VIII's pontificate (1623-1644) regulated the process of canonization itself. One new introduction was the redefinition of beatification as an intermediary step in the process. A beatified individual could be venerated within a restricted region or community, commonly within a religious order, whilst canonization would allow for universal veneration. Beatification would normally be bestowed following confirmed 'signs', in the form of miracles or otherwise, performed by God on behalf of that particular holy individual. People who were convinced of the sanctity of an individual formed cults of prayer, in anticipation of these signs. A number of decrees at the beginning of the seventeenth century put further restriction on the veneration of candidates earmarked for canonization, such as an impediment on canonization in the first fifty years from their death. The process thus became long and expensive and a candidate for sainthood needed more

9 Copeland, *Sanctity*, 226.

10 Peter Burke, *How to become a Counter-Reformation Saint*. In David M. Luebke ed., *The Counter-Reformation: The Essential Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 1999), 131.

11 Copeland, *Sanctity*, 227

than just signs from God; he or she had to have a powerful patron, reliable connections in Rome, a popular cult and someone who tirelessly advocated the cause. Permitting private devotions to unofficial saints allowed the individual to discern true holiness and true miracles for himself. In principle, Rome still wanted devotees to identify possible individuals for future canonizations. Despite the bureaucratic process, the Church still based saint-making on the interpretation of the will of God and miracles were one way to assess if an individual was really in heaven or not. Exposition of the sacrament for forty hours in the papal basilica anticipated the final decision, as the consistory prayed for divine enlightenment.

The sanctity of most of the older saints was never questioned, especially those who were directly mentioned in the gospels. Nevertheless they were also given contemporary significance. No new martyrs were canonized before 1700 despite persecution in Europe and beyond. Not all traditional saints had managed to escape the scrutiny of the Congregation of Rites. In some cases such as St George and St Roche, the Church seriously considered the validity of the sources that recounted their lives, being partially shrouded in myth. What kept the Church from doing away with these saints was the fact that they had been venerated for centuries and continuity and tradition gave legitimacy to cults that would have otherwise been deemed unofficial. The seventeenth century recorded a peak in canonizations (14) and beatifications (32). In 1622, five candidates were canonized together in one ceremony (St Therese of Avila (d.1582), St Ignatius Loyola (d.1556), St Francis Xavier (d.1552), St Philip Neri (d.1595) and St Isidore Labrador (d.1130). Only one of the four canonized was a laymen (Isidore Labrador), who was also the only saint who had not lived during the sixteenth century. However he had the backing of King Philip III of Spain. The majority of candidates for sainthood were either Italian or Spanish and only three were ‘modern’ women.¹² Out of 213 open cases for canonization or beatification between 1592 and 1675, only 24 were not associated with religious orders and most of them

¹² Ibid., 231.

were nonetheless priests or clerics. Females were usually portrayed as mystics: three of the five women canonized in the seventeenth century (Teresa of Avila, Maria Maddalena de Pazzi and Rose of Lima) were venerated as models of monastic life, endowed with mystical powers.¹³ These women represented a much larger body of women who claimed mystical holiness, but only those within the monastic system were safe from the prying eye of the Inquisition.¹⁴ It becomes clear that being a member of a religious order went a long way in assuring some degree of success in the saint-making enterprise. Religious orders had territories which provided income, houses in Rome which provided a network of connections and proximity to the hub of the Catholic Church. They travelled, thus exporting cults, hagiographies and relics and they were present on a community level which helped in strengthening the domestic aspect and inspire lay people to pray for intercession to their candidates and obtain miracles. There were literally hundreds of these candidates, ‘men and women who merely enjoyed *fama sanctitatis* throughout the Catholic world during the period; they should therefore be set beside the mere fourteen who were papally canonized (1588-1665)’.¹⁵

Hospitaller Saints

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the Order of St John too was attempting to rebrand its image of sanctity through a refashioning of its own saints, and in 1622, the historian of the Order Giacomo Bosio published a supplement to his *Istoria della Sacra Religione* entitled *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione* for that purpose.¹⁶ In this publication, Bosio did not only refashion the image of a number of Hospitaller saints through his eulogies, but went as far as to reproduce actual images of each saint. Some of these images

13 Burke, *How to become a Counter-Reformation Saint*, 132.

14 Copeland, *Sanctity*, 233.

15 Ditchfield, *Tridentine Worship and the Cult of the Saints*, 215.

16 Bosio, *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*. (Rome, 1622).

were reproductions of those found in the place of origin of that saint's cult, whilst others seem to have been already in the possession of the Order, hung purposely in the Oratory of the Conventual Church. As shall be pointed out further on, there is a strong link between Bosio's images and hagiographies that is meaningful within the larger context of Tridentine refashioning. This work is mainly a collection of short hagiographies of those members of the Order of St John who were traditionally held as saints and blessed. Considering that none of the Order's saints were canonised using Tridentine standards, the work that Bosio presents may be seen as an attempt to demonstrate that these medieval saints of the Order were nonetheless representative of the values and morals that Tridentism was advocating. In many ways, Bosio's hagiographies form part of this wider refashioning process that was taking place within Catholicism, using traditional saints to represent contemporary exemplars. The strategy of using images to instil devotion was highlighted in major Catholic Tridentine works such as Gabriele Paleotti's *Discorso Intorno alle Imagini Sacre et Profane* (1582), which emphasised the need of regulating the use of visual arts to complement doctrine.¹⁷ Bosio himself states so in his prologue, saying that he hoped that 'the Holy Spirit kindled with the example of these saints, a true wish (in the hearts of members of the Order) to imitate the actions, the virtues and for them to carry around this small book which like a mirror, a continuous testimony, would motivate them to charitable actions'.¹⁸

Peter Burke discusses the idea that some communities were 'programmed' to perceive sanctity in a certain way, implying that it was not only necessary to possess a certain set of values to become a Catholic saint, but that social background was also a central part of

17 Cattoi e Primerano eds., *Arte e Persuasione: La strategia delle immagini dopo il Concilio di Trento*. (Trent: Museo Diocesano di Trento, 2014), 148-151; Gabriele Paleotti, *Discorso Intorno alle Imagini Sacre et Profane*. (Bologna, 1582).

18 Bosio, *Le Imagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*, 5: '...[lo] Spirito Santo, d'accendere con l'esempio di questi Santi, un'ardente desiderio d'imitare le degne attione, e l'eccellenti Virtù loro...questo piccolo libricciuolo; quasi come uno specchio, e Memorioale continuouo, che gli ecciti, e spinga al ben'operare.'

the image of a saint.¹⁹ The saints of the Order as presented by Bosio reflected also the wider general perception of who would be the ideal candidate for sanctity in Tridentine Catholicism.²⁰ The fifty-five saints that were canonized in the period between 1588 and 1767²¹ can be compared to the saints and the blessed of the Order of St John. Bosio uses the terms ‘saint’ and ‘blessed’ interchangeably, and even though he refers to some individuals as *santo* as opposed to *beato*, he does not give details of the distinction between the two. In some cases, he does specify that sainthood was proclaimed through public acclamation. Firstly, males were more likely to obtain sainthood, with forty-three out of the fifty-five canonized in that period being men. The Order had a similar ratio of eight out of eleven saints and blessed being males. Secondly, the country of origin also played an important role, with twenty-six of the fifty-five being Italian, seventeen Spanish and the remaining twelve from other countries. Similarly within the Order of St John, six out of eleven are Italian, with doubts on the country of origin of the first rector of the Hospital, Blessed Gerard. Social standing was not a secondary matter either, with saints of noble origin amounting to twenty-six out of the fifty-five candidates canonized between 1588 and 1767. Even if Bosio does not make reference to the status at birth in all of his cases, in three instances (Raymond du Puy, Ubaldesca and Toscana) he specifically mentions that they were born in wealthy and influential households. He does so to promote further the value of their choice to relinquish earthly possessions and offer their lives in the service of the poor.

Founders of religious orders were very popular amongst the canonized saints of Tridentine Catholicism; in fact there were twelve individuals from the above mentioned period who fit into this category, including some of the most renowned heroes of Tridentism, such as Therese of Avila, Ignatius Loyola, Francis de Sales (1567-1622),

19 Burke, *How to become a Counter-Reformation Saint*, 137.

20 Laura Corti, *Santi ed Eroi: L'Immaginario dei Cavalieri Gerosolimitani*. In Laura Corti, Francesco Amendolagine, and Maria Doglioni, eds., *Lungo il tragitto crociato della vita* (Venice: Marsilio, 2000), 201-227.

21 Burke, *How to become a Counter-Reformation Saint*, 138.

Cajetan of Thiene (1480-1547), Camillo de Lellis (1550-1614) and Vincent de Paul (1581-1660). Philip Neri and John of God are both considered posthumous founders of the Oratorians and the Brothers Hospitaller respectively.²² Similarly the Order held Frà Gerard and Frà Raymond du Puy as blessed founders of the Order. Like Neri and John of God, Blessed Gerard might have started his charitable activities without the intent of formally founding a religious organisation. Nevertheless, according to Giacomo Bosio, the official chronicler of the Order, he was still alive when his small group of lay brothers received official recognition by means of a Papal Bull in 1113.²³ Bosio, however attributes the first Magistracy to Raymond du Puy, who also wrote a Rule for the Order, similar to that of St Augustine, but with particular elements that reminded the members of the Order of their spiritual, charitable and military calling: 'With that habit he (du Puy) wanted to remind the clothing of camel hide, that St John the Baptist, protector and advocate of this Order, wore in the desert. The cross of eight points, alludes also to the eight Evangelical Beatitudes'.²⁴ Furthermore, de Puy is presented to us as a teacher of virtues, the one saintly quality that the council had acknowledged, hoping to instil in a Hospitaller 'presented with the exterior habit, the desire to carry in the internal habit the spiritually impressed sign of the vivifying cross.' He also wanted 'to kindle the wish to follow the generous and valuable example of martyr saints and intrepid Maccabean soldiers, who laid their hopes in divine help'.²⁵

The imagery of female saints is also consistent with the Tridentine trends, despite the fact that none of these saints were canonized in the period in question. Reading Bosio's short biographies of the three female saints of the Order - St Toscana, St Ubaldesca and St Flora - one would immediately notice some recurrent themes from

22 Ibid., 138.

23 Bosio, *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*, 13: 'Morì egli, anzi se ne volò all'eterna vita nell'anno di nostra salute, mille, cento, e diciotto...'

24 Ibid., 17; 'Co'l qual Manto, alluder volle egli, come alcuni voglino, al vestimento di pelle di Camelo, che nel deserto portava San Giovanni Battista...'

25 Ibid., 18.

the lives of the later counterparts such as St Therese of Avila, St Rose of Lima, St Maria Maddalena de Pazzi and St Caterina Ricci. All three lived within the monastic setup, though still in contact with the outside world. St Toscana and St Flora originated from wealthy families, whilst St Ubaldesca was born of humbler origins. They lived a life of penance, fasting and sometimes even corporal mortification. St Ubaldesca for example demonstrated her absolute devotion to God by ‘softening her flesh with a cilice, with discipline, abstinence, fasting and continuous prayer’, and it was because of this deep spiritual devotion to God that He honoured her with the power of performing miracles in life.²⁶ St Flora was tormented by her fellow nuns in the monastery of Beaulieu, but her humbleness and sense of self-sacrifice in the face of adversity was also rewarded with mystical powers. St Toscana was married off by her parents, and she fulfilled her duty for as long as her husband lived. When she became a widow, she offered perpetual chastity to God, despite being young and beautiful, and took vows within the Order of St John. Other parallels can be drawn in the biographies of female saints of the Order and Tridentine ones, for example, sanctity usually manifests itself in a candidate from a very young age. Maria Maddalena de Pazzi and Caterina Ricci both showed signs of an ascetic and saintly life in their childhood and early youth. Similarly, Ubaldesca prayed God to show her the path to a life which would most please him, spending endless days in prayer and acts of charity. ‘At the age of fourteen, following a vision from an angel of God, she consecrated her purity to God, to the Virgin Mary and St John the Baptist, taking the habit and regular profession in the Order of St John of Jerusalem, becoming a nun.’²⁷

There are two common themes present throughout these short biographies of *Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*: one is the element of charity and the other is a continuous reference to miracles performed by these individuals. Charity was one of the major themes recurrent in Tridentine sanctity, with at least seven of those saints canonized

26 Ibid., 35.

27 Ibid., 14.

between 1588 and 1767 being synonymous with charitable activities, in particular Vincent de Paul's work among galley-slaves and more conspicuously Cammillo de Lellis and John of God's work with the infirm.²⁸ De Lellis, like the Jesuit founder Ignatius Loyola, was a soldier before he moved to Rome and founded a religious order tasked with the care of the 'incurables'.²⁹ John of God gathered around him a small group of lay brothers to work with the sick and infirm in Granada, eventually becoming the Brothers Hospitaller of St John of God. Bosio's biographies serve to hark back to Brother Gerard or Raymond du Puy, who were portrayed as the John of God and the Camillo de Lellis in the twelfth-century Holy Land. When recounting the acts of Raymond du Puy in particular, the author intentionally alternates from discussing acts of charity performed daily in the hospital, and the armed defence of Christians and the Holy Land, consciously expressing the belief that one is simply an extension of the other. Nor does an active life, be it in the hospital or wielding a sword, exclude moments of prayer. In a set of visual representation of the saints that accompanies the hagiographies, Bosio represents Raymond du Puy holding a crucifix in one hand, with a *Paternoster* in the other and a sword at his side. The crucifix represents the ultimate act of *caritas*; the love of Christ to humanity which culminated with the cross. The sword represents the war on heresy whilst the *Paternoster* reminds the Hospitaller of daily prayer as established by the first Rule of Blessed Raymond du Puy. Not only does not one activity exclude the other, but Bosio bases the of sanctity on the fact that Blessed Raymond managed to combine all three activities as the three pillars that contributed to the Order's prosperity. All the acts performed by the Order of St John in service of Christendom from that point on were made possible by du Puy's able leadership and heroic saintly attributes: 'Just as with his virtues he (Raymond du Puy), paved the path, on which his successors endeavoured, and through which they,

28 Burke, *How to become a Counter-Reformation Saint*, 138.

29 Just like the Hospitaller, St Camillo de Lellis who served in the Venetian wars against the Ottomans, but was debilitated by a leg wound which would not heal. This was the reason why he was not admitted in the Capuchin Order and eventually chose to work with people whose ailments were termed incurable.

with the grace of God, resulted so much good and honourable deeds in this world.³⁰

The acts of charity of other saints of the Order were also intimately linked with the signs of sanctity that God sent. At the time of the publication of *de Beati e Santi* in 1622, it was not yet explicitly dictated that a candidate for sainthood should be assessed only on the basis of miracles performed after one's death.³¹ Urban VIII's canonization bull in 1634 *Coelestis Hierusalem cives* confirmed the prohibition of publication of biographies of candidates to sainthood without ecclesiastical approval (1625), and the prohibition of the formation of cults around un-confirmed candidates. Urban VIII confirmed also the interim step of *beato* in the process of canonizations (1606). Bosio's *Beati e Santi* happens around the same time as these new introductions were being imposed on the process, but as he is not claiming an attempt to promote any of the blessed candidates to sanctity and because most of these new introductions were not yet enforced by the Congregation of Rites, his publication does not raise an eyebrow and he simply passes it off as an extension of his history of the Order.

Not all signs were accepted to be coming from God and there was already the belief that even the devil was capable of showing signs which could be easily unfounded with miracles from God.³² To reassure the reader that these saints were indeed prophets of God, even their miracles are presented in a particular manner. Departing from the belief that good comes from good as evil comes from evil, these signs had to be linked to an act of selfless love. Secondly, some of these signs, miracles and actions of Hospitaller saints evoked a link with

30 Bosio, *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*, 25: 'Onde si come egli con le Virtu' sue, ha additata la strada, per la quale caminando poi i Succesori suoi, hanno con l'aiuto di Dio, ridotte le cose dell'istesso sacro Ordine loro, all'ampiezza di tanti beni...'

31 Simon Ditchfield, *How not to be a Counter-Reformation Saint: The Attempted Canonization of Pope Gregory X, 1622-45*. In 'Papers of the British School at Rome' 60 (1992), 381.

32 Ibid., 380. As discussed in Angelo Rocca, *De canonizatione sanctorum commentarius* (1601) which dedicates an entire chapter to the problem of discerning acts of God from those of the devil.

Christ's miracles in the gospels or the deeds of the traditional saints of Christianity: 'Nothing could alter the infallible truth pronounced by Christ our Lord, who said that whoever believed in him would perform the same miracles'.³³

Signs and Miracles

Most miracles include elements popular in the gospels such as water, wine and bread. Blessed Gerard for example was caught red-handed feeding the besieging Christian armies by throwing bread from the walls of Jerusalem. When taken to the Muslim Governor, still with his robe full of bread, the bread miraculously turned to stones. Later he would be brought again in front of the Governor, accused of having hidden great riches belonging to the Hospital. In a story which reminds that of St Lawrence, Bosio attributes Blessed Gerard to have repeated the exact same words of the hero saint: 'my treasures which you seek, are in the heavenly hands of the poor'.³⁴ He was similarly bound in chains and tortured. A very similar miracle was performed by St Flora, who was caught by the abbess feeding the poor with bread from the monastery in a time of famine. The abbess accused St Flora of depleting the monastery supplies in time of great need and requested to see if it was bread that she was concealing in her mantle. The abbess was surprised to see that flowers fell instead of bread from the saint's unveiled mantle and the saint is commonly referred to as Flora or Fleur in memory of this sign from God.³⁵

St Ubaldesca, just like Jesus at the wedding at Cana (John 2:1-11) turned water into wine for some women who asked her for water to quench their thirst.³⁶ Similar miracles were attributed to

33 Bosio, *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*, 35: '...che si come l'infallibile Verità Christo Signor nostro disse, che chiunque credera' in lui, fara' gl'istessi Miracoli, ch'egli fece e anche maggiori...'.
 34 Ibid., 11; '*Facultates meas, quas requires, in Coelestis Thesauros manus Pauperum deportauerunt.*'
 35 Ibid., 107.
 36 Ibid., 36-37.

St Ugo, Commander of Genoa,³⁷ who struck water out of a rock for a woman who washed clothes at the Infirmary, and who had to walk a long distance to get fresh water. This act is reminiscent of Moses and the rock in Horeb (Exodus 17:6), as Bosio himself notes.³⁸ St Ugo is usually associated with another miracle, one similar to Jesus in the tempest (Matt 8:24). One day he noticed a ship at the point of sinking: ‘out of compassion, he rapidly descended from the tower, with tears in his eyes, he stepped in the sea up to his knees, and raising his eyes towards the heavens, he made the sign of the cross at the ship. At that moment, the seas and winds were still, and the ship entered safe in Port’.³⁹ On another occasion, St Ugo liberated a man from an evil spirit, just like Jesus did on many occasions, as did his apostles and many great saints.⁴⁰ St Toscana’s miracles included also raising people from the dead, something which is only possibly through God, and which is a direct attribute of sanctity. Her biography echoes that of other great saints of Christianity such as St Helen and St Rita of Cascia. Just like great saints and mystics she was tormented by the devil, in particular on one occasion when three young men ‘incited by a demonic spirit’⁴¹ went to her house with ill intent, but before they could act on their evil thoughts, all three fell dead, only to be resurrected by Toscana and converted. Conversion of sinners is another attribute of great saints, and in another occasion, Toscana converted another group of young men who had stolen her mantle after mass. They attempted to divide it between them,⁴² until suddenly their arms were paralysed. They returned to Toscana begging for mercy, at which point she healed them

37 Saint Ugo also transformed water into wine on one occasion. Ibid., 61.

38 Ibid., 59.

39 Ibid., 60: ‘...mosso a compassione grandissima, velocemente scese dalla torre e con molte lagrime, e singulti entro’ nel mare, fin’al ginocchio; et alzando gli occhi al cielo, fece verso la nave il Segno della Croce. E subito si raffreno’ l’impeto de’ venti e dell’ondel e tranquillandosi il mare, la Nave entro in Porto salva ...’.

40 Ibid., 65.

41 Ibid., 47. It does not implicate they were possessed, simply that their actions served a tool for the devil to torment this saintly woman.

42 Here again another comparison with the soldiers at the foot of the Cross, who wanted each a share of his robe.

and they abandoned their old sinful ways.⁴³

The graves of these heroes of the Order such as those of Blessed Gerland of Germany and Blessed Garçia Martinez were transformed into shrines, as the sick who devoutly lay on the final resting place of these Hospitallers, miraculously healed. According to Bosio, all these miracles were proven and recorded, in a similar manner as testimony would be gathered in a Tridentine cause for beatification or canonisation. In the case of Blessed Gerland, testimony was gathered by the magistrate and jurors of Caltagirone, and later examined by Bosio himself on behalf of Grand Master Alof de Wignacourt.⁴⁴ In this case as in some of the others, saintly attributes were not given by official papal canonization, but by the authentication and confirmation of the miracles attributed to that particular saint by the bishop. Blessed Gerland for example had been venerated popularly as *santo*⁴⁵ for more than three hundred years, and his feast was celebrated annually at Alicata and Caltagirone. St Ugo's miracles were confirmed by the sworn testimony of those who witnessed his miracles, and these sworn confessions were kept by the Archbishop of Genova.⁴⁶

Martyrdom in Hospitaller Piety

In the year 1614, in Cagliari, excavations began to unearth a catacomb complex which had been used by the first Christians. As the works progressed, an astounding number of bodies was discovered, most having some sort of epigraphic label etched on their tomb, with the letters B.M. For Dionigio Bonfant, who published an extensive volume on this discovery a few years later, there was no doubt that

43 Bosio, *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*, 50.

44 Ibid., 83-84; Grand Master Wignacourt wanted to make sure also that Blessed Gerald was indeed a member of the Order, so he commissioned Frà Giuseppe de Inga from Caltagirone to provide authentic information that confirmed the membership of Blessed Gerland in the Order.

45 Saint and Blessed are used interchangeably.

46 Bosio, *Le Immagini de' Beati e Santi della Sacra Religione*, 85.

these two letters could only mean one thing; 'beatus' martyr, with the status being pinned on some 300 plus of these bodies, most of which eventually found their way to convents and churches quite far away from their native Sardinia.⁴⁷

This discovery, and the festivities and ceremonies that naturally ensued, was far from an isolated event in Counter-Reformation Italy, or indeed anywhere else in Catholic Europe. There had been a sharp increase in interest in the years following the Council of Trent, in the lives of saints and martyrs in particular. This interest had reached such levels that many did not rely on serendipity, but had gone themselves into the uncharted subterranean catacombs, caves and ruins, in search for the lost earthly remains of the first Christian martyrs. Above we mentioned in passing Antonio Bosio. He had close links with the Order of St John through his uncle Giacomo, and who had earned the nickname of 'Christopher Columbus' of subterranean Rome. One notorious discovery which relates to Bosio and Rome is that of the remains of St Cecilia in Trastevere in 1599. It caused such excitement amongst the population of Rome, that the Pope Clement VIII himself, bedridden with gout, came out to officiate the translation of the saint's relics. This is how Antonio Bosio, an eyewitness, described the scene;

It was above all the matrons and young girls of the highest Roman nobility, swept up by their love for their virgin fellow citizen, who huddled there, lingered and prostrated themselves as supplicant worshippers. They did not get up again until dusk called them home at the end of the day when they went with the impatient desire for returning....with what singing they praised her, with what ardent prayers they addressed her, and just how blessed and happy they all were that in their own time this most chaste martyr should be offered to their sight in person.⁴⁸

47 Simon Ditchfield, *Martyrs on the Move: Relics as vindicators of local diversity in the Tridentine Church*. In Diana Wood ed., *Martyrs and Martyrologies* (Oxford: Blackwell publishers, 1993), 283.

48 Simon Ditchfield, *An Early Christian School of Sanctity in Tridentine Rome*. In Simon Ditchfield ed., *Christianity and Community in the West: Essays for John*

Such fervour with martyrs and their relics might have gone out of hand, and although it was believed that God has so providentially revealed these holy bodies for veneration in a time of need, the Papal Curia in Rome was weary of abuse of this grace. The Church could not allow itself to become once more the target of Protestants, who had ridiculed Catholics for being too ready to believe in the authenticity of relics. Such discoveries would go through much scrutiny in Rome, particularly after the setting up of the Congregation of Rites and Ceremonies, entrusted with authenticating these discoveries. Nevertheless, the Church was very much in need of these bodies, to prove an element of '*semper eadem*' or continuity with the first group of Christians. The Catholic Church wanted to strengthen its position vis-à-vis the other denominations as the one true 'mother' or apostolic church, and no one had a better claim than he who possessed the physical remains of the apostles, saints and martyrs themselves. We can therefore study regional devotions, in this case, the Order of St John in Malta, in the light of these discoveries which brought about a refashioning of the Catholic image and identity. One cannot possibly tackle the subject of Hospitaller spirituality in isolation, as during the Counter-Reformation, non-conformity with Papal principles was not really an option for a religious Order that had the Pope himself as its head.

The curiosity on the lives, and more importantly the death, of the countless nameless martyrs that were discovered in the catacombs, sparked many hagiographies to be written and published, and although these stories were mostly fictitious right down to the names of the martyrs themselves, they became very popular, mainly because the readers felt an affinity towards their forefathers in faith. Early Modern society was afflicted by religious strife between Protestants and Catholics, first in Germany, then France and England and the Low Countries, along with the continuous fear from the spread of Islam. It was just as easy to die for one's religious beliefs in the 16th and 17th centuries as it was for the first martyrs during the Roman persecution. And it was precisely

this effect that the Church had hoped for, and thus made full use of the visual and literary language of martyrdom to urge its faithful not to give in to persecution, and remain loyal to Rome. For us, today, this whole infrastructure built around martyrdom, along with the countless examples of visual and literary representation which are at times too graphical, might seem to border with obsession. Perhaps early modern society was obsessed with thoughts of dying a violent death; however, it highlights the Christian desire to give meaning to death, and the hope that suffering would be rewarded in the end.

It is this ideology that was often transmitted through the very graphical examples of martyrdom produced by Mannerist and Baroque artists for the Roman Catholic churches and cathedrals. One might be tempted to say that these works of art are too realistic (a criticism that Caravaggio and Artemisia Gentileschi received). Others might assimilate their 'over the top' content with a general fascination with the theatrical which was so typical of Early Modern society. This in part is true, but does not incorporate the whole meaning behind such artistic expression. Catholicism in general, and the Order of St John in particular, intended to make use of what is called '*peinture parlant*' or '*peinture spirituelle*',⁴⁹ that is, the use of art, to impart the teaching of the gospel, and to stimulate devotion in the hearts of those most obdurate to piety. Mary Laven describes this as the product of 'a competitive phase of Catholicism, propped up, it might appear, as much by marble pillars and gilded statuary, as by the pious simplicity that the Catholic reformers had once invoked'.⁵⁰

The Order of St John, just like all the other religious Orders, came under scrutiny from the Papal Curia, and needed to prove its relevance to the Catholic Church or face suppression. The Siege of 1565 provided the Order with the means to prove its worth as a missionary organization, and therefore its significance in a fast changing reality of

49 A. Ossa-Richardson, *Image and Idolatry: the case of Louis Richeome*. In Emma Gilby and Paul White eds., *Method and Variation; Narrative in Early Modern French Thought* (Oxford: Legenda, 2013), 42.

50 Mary Laven, *Encountering the Counter-Reformation*. In '*Renaissance Quarterly*' 59, no. 3 (2006), 707.

religious struggle. Transmitting the notion that members of the Order shed their blood in defence of the Church was as pivotal as winning the siege itself, as it rebranded the Order according to Tridentine standards. The knights made excellent use of the parallelism with the scriptures and with the first martyrs; in fact they portrayed themselves as ‘new Maccabees’, a small band of men anointed by God to fight and die if needs be to defend the true faith. The possibility that one might die fighting for the Religion was seen as an extension of the missionary zeal which was at the basis of the Order’s Rule. Martyrdom thus became a core notion in the Hospitaller vocation, and there is no doubt that all members of the Order, knights, chaplains and servants, were made aware of this.

On the other hand, there were benefits to a martyr’s death. Christian theology sees martyrdom as a second baptism, in blood instead of water, which redeems the individual from all sins previously committed and promises eternal salvation. For many knights, particularly the less pious ones, this was a ‘bonus’, the opportunity to erase a lifetime of sin at the very moment of death, just like the penitent thief who was crucified with Christ. It is however interesting to note how the Order makes little reference to Frà David Gunston (Gunson/Genson) who was hung, drawn and quartered by Henry VIII for refusing to accept the king as the supreme head of the Church. Gunston was executed in 1541, only months after Sir Adrian Fortescue and Frà Thomas Dingley.⁵¹ Possibly, Gunston was never considered a saint to par with the latter two, in view of his quarrelsome character.⁵² He was simply given the appellation of ‘the good knight’ in the Council Minutes, but not *beato*

51 There were possibly other Hospitallers who were executed later by Elizabeth I. As for Adrian Fortescue, whose cult was by far more popular than Dingley’s, and his association with the Hospitaller Frà Thomas Dingley, who suffered the same fate, see Richard Rex, *Blessed Adrian Fortescue: A martyr without a cause?* In ‘*Analectica Bollandiana*’ 115 (1997), 307–353.

52 A. Mifsud, *Knights Hospitallers of the Venerable Tongue of England* (Valletta: 1914), 205. In 1535, Gunston was involved in an altercation with Frà Philip Babington and Frà Christopher Myers. The quarrel ended in a bloody duel. Babington is presumably the person who denounced Gunston in England, leading to Gunston’s arrest, whilst Myers was later expelled from the Order after murdering a woman.

or *santo*.⁵³ He was later beatified on 15th December 1929 by Pope Pius XI, but there is no indication that there was a cult present within the Order long before that. He is not even mentioned by Goussancourt or Bosio. Notwithstanding that many died for a religious cause during the Counter-Reformation, there were clearly precise conditions for one to qualify as a martyr. Intent. is the first and most important condition. One had to be willing to voluntarily give up his life, despite there being a way out, such as renouncing the faith for example. Secondly, since martyrdom is an act testimony, the action needed to inspire others to act in the same way. Historiography of the Order of St John has frequently highlighted episodes of martyrdom involving knights which demonstrated both these conditions. We can take a couple of examples;

In 1672, the young French knight Temericourt was out corsairing, when he was shipwrecked off the coast of Tripoli. He was mistaken for a deserter, but he identified himself as a knight of Malta. At first he was put in prison and treated with great humanity, as the sultan, seeing Temericourt was so young, attempted to persuade him to convert to Islam with promises of riches, power and marriage to a young princess. When the sultan realised that these methods did not work, he tried to scare the twenty-two year old knight into apostasy by means of torture. As neither fear nor pain were enough to persuade Temericourt to give up his Religion, the sultan resolved to behead him and throw his dead body over a pile of manure. A few days had passed and the body was not showing signs of decomposition, so the sultan ordered that it be thrown in the river for fear that Christians might attempt to claim it as a relic. Temericourt had every occasion to save his life, but remained steadfast, and freely chose a martyr's death over renouncing Christ.

Another episode highlights more the element of selflessness and the disposition to serve as an example to others. Among the many accounts of knights who died fighting during the siege of 1565, Bosio mentions Frà Abel Bridiers from Provence, nicknamed Gardampé who was mortally wounded during the assault on fort St Elmo. Bridiers did not want to be carried away, so that his friends would not leave their

53 NLM, Arch. 955, f. 31r.

posts, and, injured as he was, walked by himself to the chapel of the fort, recommended his soul to God and died. His serene judgement of priorities and his pious approach to death 'left in the hearts of all a deep sense of faith and a firm belief that he was amongst the saints in heaven'.

Conclusion

It is hard to assess what impact this new approach had on the individual members of the Order, whether they too wanted to imitate the examples highlighted in the *vite* of the saints of the Order or whether they were simply the belligerent, spoilt young noblemen as later reputation would have them. It is just as hard to understand the extent of success the Order had in promoting the cult of its saints in parallel to older, more established cults of great saints of the Catholic Church, or whether the cults of Hospitaller saints were still being regarded as inferior by the Hospitallers themselves. What is certain is, that the fact that these cults were not suppressed, despite the obvious shortcomings in compiling veritable historical information on the lives of some of these saints, is already proof that the Order's efforts and connections paid off. It is highly doubtful that, in any other circumstance, the semi-legendary Blessed Gerard, saints Nicasius and Ferrandino and possibly some of the other saints, would pass the rigours that the Congregation of Rites was imposing on the newer candidates. As with certain cases, such as that of Adrian Fortescue and Gerland of Germany, a closer look at the documentary evidence casts serious doubts on whether they were even members of the Order of St John.⁵⁴ Either way, it seems the Inquisitors (whose role it was to flag unsanctioned cults) and the Grand Masters had a lot of unresolved issues, but the matter of 'non-Tridentine' Hospitaller

54 There were suspicions even in Bosio's day on whether Blessed Gerald was a Hospitaller or a Templar, considering he was originally interred in the church of Santa Maria del Tempio of Caltagirone.



Figure 1. Blessed Raymond du Puy, Master under whom the Order assumed also a military function, shown holding a crucifix, a paternoster and a sword at his side, denoting the mission of the Order to defend the holy land, both spiritually and physically (right). A later portrait (centre) shows him also wearing the 'stolone' (left) with symbols of the passion of Christ. Courtesy of Wignacourt Museum, Rabat.



Figure 2. St. Ugo Commander of Genoa shown in full portrait which features also two of his greatest miracles (left and right) and Bosio's copy (inset). Courtesy of Wignacourt Museum, Rabat.

saints' does not seem to have been among them.⁵⁵

So how can piety and spiritual sentiment be measured? How can we know if the Order's efforts in the formation of novices for instance, or the many preachers that were invited to give sermons and eulogies, had an actual lasting effect on the way members of the Order lived their faith? Was membership in the Order of St John a true religious vocation, or was it simply another elitist group just like many others in Ancien Régime Europe? Just as it would be unfair to project on the Order modern impressions that knights (in particular) were unruly, forced into joining and that they generally could not care less about the vows they took, it would be similarly incorrect to measure their devotion and spirituality with our modern yardstick. Spirituality manifests itself differently from one generation to the next, let alone over a span of four centuries. Faced with this dilemma, all a historian could do is revert back to the documentary and physical evidence. The first proof I felt that deserves to be noted in relation to this discussion, is the collection of thirty-five pieces of *Terra Sigillata Melitensis* medals in the Buonarroti Collection in Florence.⁵⁶ What is extraordinary about this collection from the point of view of the present study on Hospitaller saints, is that it shows a number of saints of the Order, alongside some of the Counter-Reformation's greatest heroes, notably St Charles Borromeo, and with other great saints of Christianity like St Sebastian, St Lawrence, St Catherine of Siena and naturally St Paul. The fact that the artist, most probably upon the specific request of Frà Francesco Buonarroti (1574-1631), chose to represent indiscriminately saints whose cults were so well established and universal along with Hospitaller saints whose cults were much more domestic and limited, indicates that individual knights did not just accept this mix of old and new, domestic and universal, Hospitaller and not, but were also trying to disseminate these cults. This we can ascertain as the medals of *TSM*

55 The present author has not seen any evidence to date that raises cause for concern on the Order's part that any of its saints risked suppression.

56 George Zammit Maempel, *Seals of Medicinal Terra Sigillata Melitensis and Pauline Traditions in Malta*. (Malta: BDL Books, 2010).

were generally produced for distribution, and possibly Frà Buonarroti had a special permission to do so himself. The Hospitaller 'saints' featured in the Buonarroti collection which have survived are: Brother Gerard, Raymond du Puy, Ubaldesca, Toscana, Ugo, Gerard Mecatti, Gerland of Germany, Nicasius, Domenico Garzia Martinez, Pietro of Imola, Adrian Fortescue and Thomas Dingley. The appearance of the latter, Thomas Dingley, among the saints of the Order is certainly uncommon, and might represent an attempt to boost his cult alongside the more popular Adrian Fortescue.

A second insight into the spiritual sentiment of any member of the Order could be attained from written testimony. We quoted above Bosio's prologue to his *Vite* where he wished that the example of these saints would motivate them to charitable actions. There were many members of the Order whose lives were exemplary, saintly even, but whose stories were never written or need to be rediscovered. Giovanni Battista le Marinier de Cany is one such example, a case in point to prove that certain knights were convinced that to become a saint, one did not necessarily need to be a great Church reformer like Charles Borromeo, nor a great preacher and theologian like Ignatius Loyola or Theresa of Avila. Cany was certain that simple acts of charity and kindness as stipulated by the Rule of the Order of St John, feeding the hungry like St Flora, taking care of the sick like Garcia Martinez or quenching the thirsty like Ubaldesca was enough to attain sanctity. This is the advice he gave to his fellow brothers: 'Sanctify yourselves and be holy, because I am the Lord your God (Lev. 20:7), be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5:48). Everyone should remain steadfast in his vocation, as perfection is attained ... by persevering in that profession in which one is committed, observing with dedication those functions and duties. Consider therefore what God expects from a knight of Malta'.⁵⁷

57 NLM, Arch. 1697, ff. 3r-v. The author of this work is Gio. Battista Le Marinier de Cany of the Langue of France during the reign of GM Carafa, whom Cany served as Secretary of France. Cany was one of the eight knights who reopened the Camerata in 1685. This volume was once part of the Camerata library.